

School Health Improvement in El Monte City School District

El Monte, California

Problem Overview

The El Monte City School District (EMCSD) Coordinated School Health Steering Committee members utilized the School Health Index, provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), to identify and help prioritize the wellness issues that needed attention. Key overarching needs included lack of staff and parental awareness of district health policies and services, community resources, and other options available to address health difficulties.

Additionally the student population had a significantly high obesity rate and ninety percent of students were eligible for free or reduced-priced lunches. Parents needed to know how to access and choose nutritious food to serve to their families. Specifically, parents wanted to learn how to put together good meals with their limited incomes, using the CalFresh products available to them.

Furthermore the lack of open space available for the community to engage in physical activity, in El Monte, needed attention. And due to the 2004 WIC reauthorization requirements, the district needed to develop and adopt a district wellness policy by the 2006 school year. Considering the health challenges EMCSD faced, it became increasingly clear that the various district health departments needed to move out of their silos and coordinate their efforts to assist the school district.

Program/Activity Description

During 2006, EMCSD formed an initial Coordinated School Health Steering Committee (CSHSC). Over time, coordinated school health (CSH) leadership sent invitations to a variety of groups, whose work overlapped with school health, asking representatives to join or contribute to what became known as the Wellness and Achievement Coordinated School Health Council. These entities included parent groups, local hospitals, senior services, community services, park and recreation centers, and after-school programs, to name a few. Three major interests of district school leaders were to: A) improve the wellness of students and staff, B) demonstrate the link between student health and academic achievement, and C) empower stakeholders to positively change their lives.

During 2004-2005, two school district employees, representing food services and instruction, attended the state CSH leadership institute training. The success of this training filtered down to the county level where in 2006-2007, the district CSH team and two school board members attended a CSH leadership institute training consisting of four sessions held over a two-year time frame. The California Department of Education, the American Cancer Society (ACS), and the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) hosted the institute sessions. ACS provided the majority funding for the institute. The institute served as the major catalyst to support and propel EMCSD staff in developing and implementing CSH activities. The institute provided structure and

tools to guide participants on how to connect with community partners to gain support (resources) for implementing CSH strategies.

Following completion of the institute, ACS and LACOE have continued to facilitate follow-up meetings for staff from the various school districts that sent representatives to the institute sessions and whose organizations established formal collaborative ties by forming a CSH consortium. These follow-up meetings have enabled members to share success strategies with each other which have contributed to each district's development of a CSH action plan. Funding sources for LACOE's work in this area have included a Project Renew grant (provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009), the Gilbert Foundation, and ACS.

This type of support helped the CSH Steering Committee prepare a wellness policy, comprehensively vetted by community partners, that was adopted by the school board. The policy was built using the California School Board Association's (CSBA) model wellness policy. EMCSD went beyond CSBA's policy template to add a section on school health services. To promote general knowledge of the wellness policy, related information is included in the annual *Welcome Back* packets provided to parents. Also, parents, teachers, and students continue to receive health, nutrition, and wellness information throughout the year via training sessions, meetings, classroom instruction, and news articles. Additionally the monthly electronic *Staff Wellness and Nutrition* newsletter features related awareness information for its readers.

District administration took advantage of an offer, presented by the district's health insurance carrier, to encourage staff to participate in onsite (via a health motorhome) screenings which included diabetes, height, weight, blood pressure, and obesity checks, etc. Then, as a reward for participating in the program, staff received no-cost health education resources.

EMCSD also implemented "Operation Tone Up" for fourth and fifth graders. After students completed a 10-week nutrition and physical activity curriculum, tied to California health standards, six to eight students were chosen at random to compete in a physical fitness/nutrition contest. While participating in the "Fittest School challenge," these students performed 20 minutes of aerobic and stamina activities including jogging in place, sit-ups, pull-ups, and uprights. ("Uprights" signify jogging in place while simultaneously keeping one's arms straight as a student continuously moves them back forth from pointing upward to pointing forward, never allowing the hands to go lower than the chin.) The students then went on to participate in a nutrition information competition, using a Jeopardy format. Winners were chosen based on their team's success in correctly identify the presented nutrients and maintaining proper form and endurance during the physical activity assessments. Winners were identified as the "Fittest School" in the district and were honored by receiving T-shirts and printed awards.

The district's CSH Action Plan, partially supported by a Gilbert Foundation grant, includes a focus on ensuring that classroom parties and celebrations comply with federal, state, and the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's (AHG) food and beverage recommendations and guidelines. School sites are encouraged to utilize non-food

items and rewards for classroom events. School principals are required to sign a form that commits them to abide by all district requirements related to fundraising endeavors.

Additional Partner Contributions

Past and present community partners that have contributed to the school health work of EMCSD include ACS, Methodist Hospital, Kaiser Permanente, the Dairy Council, AHG, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), the Nutrition Network, and LACOE. These entities have provided financial support, educational resources, health education presentations, and professional development sessions.

In 2007, EMCSD invited teachers, families, corporate entities, and city departments to a community meeting where a vision of CSH was shared and attendees were invited to go to one of eight tables (representing the eight components of CSH) to discuss what contribution(s) they could make to the implementation of that component. Subsequently all the schools in the district integrated nutrition and physical activity education instruction into their campus programs. Rio Honda (K-8) School also worked with the City of El Monte to conduct a community jog-a-thon/wellness fair that featured healthy, low cost, commonly available foods. Food tastings were offered ("Fear Factor" activity) to acquaint participants with fresh fruits and vegetables they had not consumed before, such as kiwis. These items were presented as additional options that can be obtained through CalFresh (NEOP).

ACS has produced a great CSH toolkit that even includes model letters and Email messages that can be used to encourage school administrators and community members to support CSH efforts. Additionally, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development provides the Healthy School Report Card that school entities can use to determine their strengths and gaps regarding school health implementation. EMCSD utilized both of these resources to guide their school health activities.

The Nutrition Network provides fund-raising packets that helped EMCSD secure financial support for the district and nutrition education resources for use with both parents and teachers.

In collaboration with the Los Angeles Department of Public Health and LACOE, the district negotiate a new joint-use agreement with park and recreation department to increase access to open land and facilities where individuals could participate in physical activities. The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, utilizing the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, provided a Project Renew grant that supplied Greenfield outdoor fitness equipment to Columbia Elementary School for use during and after school by both students and the community.

Community partners themselves are committed to help maintain a cadre of civic supporters of CSH by seeking replacements for collaborators who cease their involvement in school health activities. School health council meetings provided a forum for community partners to plan joint health efforts among themselves and in connection with local schools.

For example, Kaiser Permanente has sponsored the *Weight of the Nation* series and has distributed this DVD/web-based resource free of charge to any agency wishing to access it. Methodist Hospital provided outreach to school staff and parents on topics including asthma, tobacco use, and hypertension. AHG and RWJF have provided technical assistance to better coordinate available resources and community partner input. With this support, EMCSD is proud to have received AHG's gold, silver, and bronze awards.

Program Evaluation & Activity Outcomes

Each year EMCSD conducts a survey (30 questions) of all school staff to measure the success of the CSH initiatives. The survey gathers staff advice regarding what improvements school health leadership should initiate to improve school health endeavors. The key to developing quality survey questions is to make sure the inquiries address issues the recipients face on a daily basis (e.g., the number of minutes students are allotted to eat their meals, sufficient quantity of PE equipment, etc.). In the past, staff have suggested provision of more professional development (e.g., physical education teaching techniques) and increased delivery of parent training. The survey results are presented to the school board each autumn. The findings, along with school board member responses to the survey summary, provide direction for the creation of the next school wellness action plan.

Short-term outcomes include:

- 1) The school board adopted a change in the wellness policy to mandate the availability of ample drinking water to students throughout the school day.
- 2) Teachers were required to employ physical activity breaks in the classroom throughout the school day.
- 3) Teachers integrated nutrition education into math and language arts classes.
- 4) Through a partnership between the After School Technical Assistance Unit within LACOE and the Center for Collaborative Solutions (CCS), six Los Angeles afterschool programs are continuing to establish six new Healthy Behaviors Learning Centers. One example is the Kids Campus – El Monte. This center addresses the childhood obesity epidemic by including CCS' *Exemplary Practices in Healthy Eating, Physical Activity, and Food Security* into its extended day programs. These programs have made significant progress in implementing the *Exemplary Practices* and changing the lives of the children and families they serve, as well as their own staff.

Intermediate outcomes include:

- 1) The Nutrition Network provides professional development for school staff regarding the topics of health education, physical activity, and nutrition.
- 2) The school board adopted the 2005 state Physical Education Standards. Then in 2008, the school board adopted the state Health Education Standards.

- 3) City programs adopted and implemented physical activity and nutrition policies that generally align to the school district wellness policy (common practice and messaging). For example, healthy food options are to be offered when children are in attendance. To support implementation of these city policies, students provided video-taped testimony and 800 parents contributed their signatures to a petition to support city council approval of the stipulations.
- 4) School site celebrations feature physical activities and non-food rewards. If food is included, it must comply with the wellness policy requirements. For the last several years, the school district has worked with the city to host a community walk and health fairs. Parents, staff, and students are all encouraged to attend.
- 5) As an increasing number of students are becoming homeless, school district services have been developed to meet the entire family's needs. These provisions include food, clothing, legal assistance, mental and health services, advocacy, and transportation.

Program Contact Information

Agency name: El Monte City School District (K – 8)

Name of program: Coordinated School Health Team

Project/activity coordinator name: Mary Jones, Teacher on Special Assignment (focus on science, mandated health, nutrition)

Phone: 626-453-3700 Ext. 3632

Email: mjones@emcsd.org

Project web address:

*District wellness policy: <http://www.emcsd.org/nutrition-services/wellness-policy>

*District nutrition website: <http://network.emcsd.org/>

*Non-food rewards pamphlet:

<http://www.healthysd.gov/Documents/NonfoodRewards.pdf>

*Non-foods rewards teacher/parent packet:

<http://health.utah.gov/obesity/gms/guide/RewardsKids.pdf>